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On-line services tell you what's new on the Web

E-BIZ

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A new type of worker, known as the "competitive intelligence professional," has emerged in the past decade.

These people, who are adept at performing electronic and other forms of research, now populate the landscape of large corporations, either as employees or on contract.

They execute sophisticated research of developments with respect to competitors, business associates and customers. One of their many tasks is to ensure that management is up to date on topics of interest — a process you could call "information monitoring."

Small business can take advantage of equally sophisticated information monitoring capabilities by using a few key Internet services.

You may want to track who is winning various contracts and tenders. Not only that, to be really on the ball, you should be monitoring developments with some emerging issue or topic that is important to your marketing or operations.

There are a number of effective and inexpensive on-line tools available. Among the most powerful is Mind-it (**www.netmind.com**), a free service that lets you automatically monitor any World Wide Web page on the Internet. As soon as the page is changed, you'll be notified via E-mail.

How might you use such a service? Set it up to track press release pages, "what's new" pages or others on the Web sites of your clients or your competitors. That way, you'll know as soon as they post new information on-line.

I monitor about 25 different Web pages so that I'm instantly aware when somebody is doing something that might have a direct impact on my day-to-day activities — and that allows me to adjust some of my actions accordingly.

Watching news and newswire sources for particular articles is also an effective means of information monitoring. There are services that let you do this automatically. Inquisit (**www.inquisit.com**), is a U.S. service that monitors hundreds of newspapers, magazines and other information sources. (It bills itself as "a CIA for the rest of us.")

You can set up a number of "agents," and any time an article appears that matches the information specified in your agent, you'll be notified via E-mail. It's a useful tool for an investment of about $10 (U.S) a month, and there are many other comparable services.

You can expand your horizons further with services that let you create your own "custom newspaper." I've been using the customization features of two services, TotalNews (**www.totalnews.com**) and Crayon (**www.crayon.net**). With a little tweaking, you can build a newspaper that includes only the topics, companies, individuals or issues that you want to track.

If you ignore the general news sources provided, which can lead to information overload, and instead focus on using these services to prepare a customized paper, you've got a very powerful tool.

I've set Crayon up so that it creates a Web page that allows quick access to any news articles appearing about certain companies and the topic of the Internet. Every day, I can visit just one site on the Internet that instantly leads me to every news article about the stuff I'm interested in that has been carried over the past 24 hours by major Canadian newspapers, newswires and other sources.

As suggested, the problem with using all these services is that you can quickly fall prey to information overload. If you set out to use them, you must be prepared to carefully modify and pinpoint the type of information you require.

You'll soon develop the same power and capabilities as big organizations spending hundreds of thousands of dollars on competitive intelligence professionals.

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